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# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Hearing on Misleading Information from the Battlefield April 24, 2007

I'll start this morning by stating what I think is already obvious: every one of my colleagues — Democratic and Republican — genuinely supports our troops. We are all deeply grateful for the sacrifices so many men and women have made voluntarily to defend our country and our freedoms.

But it's probably just as obvious that the actions of our government are not meeting our aspirations. We saw that vividly and unforgettably in the disgraceful conditions at Walter Reed.

We saw it again when government officials made an intolerable breach by making public the secret and classified CIA identity of Valerie Plame Wilson.

And we are seeing it again this morning. The bare minimum we owe our soldiers and their families is the truth. That didn't happen for the two most famous soldiers in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. For Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman, the government violated its most basic responsibility.

Sensational details and stories were invented in both cases. Sometimes, because of the fog of war, the first reports from the battlefield are inaccurate. But that doesn't seem to explain what happened here.

In Jessica Lynch's case, the first reports were right. It was the follow-up stories, published ten-days after her capture, that discarded the facts and misled the country.

The *Washington Post* published a front-page story on April 2, 2003. It was written by Vernon Loeb and Dana Priest, and it got the story right. I'll read the lead paragraphs:

*Jessica Lynch, a 19-year-old private first class missing since the ambush of an Army maintenance company 10 days ago in southern Iraq, has been rescued by Special Operations forces, defense officials said yesterday.*

*CIA operatives in Iraq located Lynch in a hospital near Nasiriyah, where she was being held because of multiple wounds, officials said, and a helicopter-borne team of Navy SEALs and Army Rangers rescued her about midnight local time.*

But the next day, April 3, the *Washington Post* ran another front-page story. This one was written by Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb. The contrast with the April 2 story is remarkable. Here's what the *Post* reported:

*Pfc. Jessica Lynch, rescued Tuesday from an Iraqi hospital, fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army's 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, U.S. officials said yesterday.*

*Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk, continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds and watched several other soldiers in her unit die around her in fighting March 23, one official said.*

Where did this false information come from? Jessica Lynch was captured on March 23. The *Washington Post* published a completely factual article on her rescue on April 2. But by April 3, ten days after her capture, U.S. officials had become the source for a story that riveted the nation, but twisted the truth beyond recognition.

It's four years later and we still don't know who's responsible and why they did it. All we really know is that they did a great disservice to Jessica Lynch.

And so I want to say to Private Lynch and her family: this Committee is going to do its best to find out the source of the fabrications that you have had to endure. We want to know whether they were the result of incompetence or a deliberate strategy to spin a compelling story at a critical time. And we will do our best to find out who should be held accountable.

Everyone on the Committee is also familiar with Pat Tillman's case. And we all share our sympathies with his wife Marie, his mother Mary, his father Patrick, his brother Kevin, and his entire family.

But his family wants more than our sympathies and apologies. They want answers. And they deserve them. Pat Tillman was killed by members of his own platoon on April 22, 2004 — three years ago this past Sunday. But since then, the family has been unable to learn why the military told the world that Corporal Tillman had been killed by the enemy when in fact they knew he had died from friendly fire.

News of the fratricide flew up the chain of command within days, but the Tillman family was kept in the dark for more than a month. Military officials sat in silence during a nationally televised memorial ceremony highlighting Pat Tillman's fight against the terrorists. Evidence was destroyed and witness statements were doctored. The Tillman family wants to know how all of this could have happened. And they want to know whether these actions were all just accidents or whether they were deliberate.

In working on this hearing, the Committee has learned of many other cases in which the military failed to tell families the truth. Sergeant Eddie Ryan was a victim of friendly fire during his second tour in Iraq. He sustained two gunshot wounds to the head and, thankfully, is still alive. But he didn't find out the truth about his injuries until five months later, even though his fellow Marines knew immediately that his injuries were due to friendly fire.

Other families, like those of First Lieutenant Sarah K. Small, Private First Class Levena Johnson, and Lieutenant Ken Ballard, have been forced to file Freedom of Information Act requests in order to obtain information about the deaths of their loved ones. These families have asked the military repeatedly for basic information, but they have been ignored or dismissed with slow and incomplete answers. This is simply unacceptable.

One of the things that make the Afghanistan and Iraq wars so different from previous wars is the glaring disparity in sacrifice. For the overwhelming number of Americans, this war has brought no sacrifice and no inconvenience.

But for a small number of Americans, the war has demanded incredible and constant sacrifice. Those soldiers and their families pay that price proudly and without complaint. That's what Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman did, and it's what their families have done.

But our government failed them. Our government hasn't done right by them. I hope, in some small but important way, this hearing can begin to right those wrongs.